Informal assessment tools in kindergarten

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Abstract

In all contexts, assessment is intended to inform and improve learning and teaching. Because of the characteristics of very young learners and of the teaching and learning process in kindergarten, assessment should be carried out in normal everyday activities while learning is happening. Therefore, it is essential for assessment tools to allow for continuous and on-going assessment as children develop and demonstrate their achievements over time. This article explores the principles of assessment and examines an informal assessment tool for carrying out observations that is suitable for assessing very young learners in EFL contexts.

Keywords: assessment; kindergarten; observation; EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

Resumen

En todo contexto, la evaluación tiene el objeto de informar y mejorar el aprendizaje y la enseñanza. Debido a las características de los niños y del proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje en el jardín de infantes, la evaluación debe llevarse a cabo durante actividades cotidianas normales mientras que el aprendizaje está ocurriendo. Por lo tanto, es esencial que los instrumentos de evaluación permitan una evaluación continua y permanente ya que los niños van desarrollando y demostrando sus logros a lo largo del tiempo. Este artículo presenta los principios de evaluación y examina una herramienta de evaluación informal para realizar observaciones que es adecuada para la evaluación del aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera en el jardín de infantes.

Palabras clave: evaluación; Jardín de Infantes; observación; ILE (Inglés como Lengua Extranjera).

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ASSESSMENT IS A fundamental component of the teaching and learning cycle. It is intended to inform and improve not only learning, but also teaching practices. Learning in kindergarten is active and therefore, assessment should be carried out *while* learning is happening, rather than as a "snapshot" of a final product or independent activity. Hence, assessment tools need to be clear, comprehensive and on-going so as to provide as much information as possible to the teacher to thoroughly comprehend both the learning and the teaching process. As children require ample time and a variety of learning opportunities to develop and demonstrate their achievements, assessment should be taken as a continuous process in natural instructional encounters.

This article first sets forth the principles of assessment applied to very young learners. Secondly, an assessment by observation method is identified as particularly suitable as a tool for assessing young learners in EFL contexts. Subsequently, a "continuum chart" (an informal observation tool, designed for very young learner classrooms) is presented, which reflects the different core principles of assessment.

Very Young Learners

Very young learners are considered in this article as students who have not yet started their primary education, meaning children of the age of three to five, who are still developing literacy in their first language. At this level, children are very energetic and enthusiastic and so classroom activities include physical exercise, games, oral interaction, group work, arts and crafts, songs, rhymes and drama activities. Children at this age can feel insecure and emotionally unstable so teachers need to be ready to praise students' efforts and offer encouragement (Roth, 1998).

Assessment and Evaluation

For the purpose of clarification, assessment and evaluation need to be differentiated. Evaluation is used by many specialists as a broader notion and as a systematic study of the different components of a course to judge its success or cost-effectiveness (Harris & McCann, 1994). The components that may be studied are syllabus objectives, course design, materials, methodology, teacher performance, lessons, programmes or skills, as well as assessment itself (Cameron, 2001).

Therefore, assessment is just one component in the evaluation of a course and refers to the "general process of monitoring or keeping track of the learners' progress" (Rea-Dickins, 2000). When dealing with assessment, formal assessment is distinguished from informal assessment. Testing is widely used by EFL teachers as one of the main instruments of formal assessment (Cameron, 2001). Tests are carried out under formal exam conditions, composed of specially designed exercises for testing language competencies (Allan, 1996) and measure a sample of an individual learner's performance

or knowledge in a given domain within a specific timeframe (Brown, 1994). Considering the characteristics of very young learners mentioned above, it is suggested that informal assessment is more appropriate at this level.

When informally assessing young learners, a specific task is not necessarily needed, nor a percentage or mark (Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 2002). This type of assessment may be based on a teacher's subjective opinion from intuition or continuous observation of students' skills, level or knowledge (Smith, 1995) and may include certain aspects of the learning process which cannot be tested formally, such as attitude and cooperation (Brewster et al., 2002). It seems reasonable to use informal types of assessment in the very young learner context (rather than formal assessment) as non-linguistic factors are an essential part of children's learning. Therefore, this article will deal with an informal assessment method, namely assessment by observation, for which an understanding of the principles underpinning assessment is needed.

Principles of Assessment

This section explores the core principles of assessment of children's learning, such as *reliability*, *validity*, *fairness*, *washback*, *accountability* and *practicality*. The sample assessment tool at the end of this article was designed to portray these six core principles.

According to Harris and McCann (1994, p. 89) assessment methods must meet the criterion of being *reliable*, which means that they are consistent and 'that under the same conditions and with the same student performance the assessment procedure would produce the same results'. Clear criteria and instructions must be established to increase the degree of reliability (Cameron, 2001). For instance, traditional paper-and-pencil tests are usually the most reliable formal assessment technique although they only measure one aspect of a skill and thus provide a "snapshot" of the learner's performance (Brewster et al., 2002). Reliable informal assessment techniques include tools for classroom observation, which describe many different aspects related to the age group and cognitive development of children.

Although *validity* is often applied to testing, any form of assessment must reach this criterion: it must 'measure what it intends to measure and not something different' (Harris & McCann, 1994, p. 89). The most valid assessment methods are those that enable the collection of a vast array of student performance descriptions or aspects of a skill (Cameron, 2001). Smith (1995) suggests that, at this level, assessment should emphasize validity more than reliability as most of the work done in very young learner classrooms cannot be measured in the statistical manner that is needed to make assessment reliable. The tool needs to outline the knowledge, skills and abilities that children are hopefully developing, continuously and in an on-going manner (in contrast to expecting clear-cut results).

To reach the principle of *fairness* it is necessary to provide different opportunities for assessment through various methods and allow children the chance to show what they have learnt and what they can do to their best advantage in familiar tasks (Cameron, 2001). Perhaps, although it may depend on the context, assessment opportunities in kindergarten include games, songs, rhymes, stories, arts and crafts and drama activities that are used as everyday teaching and learning strategies. Cameron (2001) uses the term "congruent", to explain that assessment should fit comfortably with learners' classroom experience and thus, teachers should use "non-invasive" methods. Therefore, by using activities that are familiar to learners, they are assessed on the basis of what and how they have been taught, implying that it should be an 'interactional, rather than an isolated, solo experience' (Cameron, 2001, p. 220). As far as possible, teachers should be able to assess most of their students in everyday lessons, avoiding the need to isolate students to assess them individually. However, considering the number of children in some classrooms, it may be difficult to assess all students in the group, in which case a smaller group of children may be selected to be observed (Cameron, 2001).

Accountability may be defined as 'the responsibility we have as teachers to be able to explain the rationale behind our assessment techniques to students, parents and institutions' (Harris & McCann, 1994, p. 89). This includes reporting and explaining to these key stakeholders what progress has or has not been made and why (Harris & McCann, 1994).

Furthermore, assessment techniques may have a *washback* effect, defined by Harris and McCann (1994, p. 93) as 'the influence of assessment on both teaching and learning'. On the one hand, the demands of assessment may place stress on teachers and learners, rush the learning process to cover the syllabus and restrict classroom activity to preparation for assessment, thus building up negative washback (Cameron, 2001). On the other hand, assessment may be a great motivating force; teachers determine student's strengths and needs, constructive feedback supports further learning and teachers use assessment results to plan future lessons (Cameron, 2001).

Any assessment approach should be *practical* in terms of physical resources, time constraints, financial limitations, administration and scoring (Brown, 1994). Impracticality may perhaps be reduced in kindergarten settings if assessment is to use ordinary everyday activities, as there is no extra preparation involved. However, in the case of informal observation tools, they may be time consuming for teachers to design and carry out (unless preparation time is reduced by using a sample, like the one below, as a basis to construct a new tool for the teacher's specific context).

Types of Assessment

As Cameron (2001, p. 220) states 'assessment is more than testing'. In kindergarten

settings it is not enough to use the type of assessment used with older children and adults which is often of a summative nature. Tests and products of students' work are usually limited to assessing structures of the language, vocabulary or functions, and do not take the development of the individual into account (Smith, 1995). The greatest difference when assessing very young learners is in the way they learn. Knowledge is constructed and expressed in experiential, interactive, concrete and hands-on ways: through songs, dances, drama activities, movement and so forth. Essential in very young learner classrooms are also non-linguistic goals, which may include aspects such as the development of fine and gross motor skills, attitude, effort and participation.

Cameron (2001) explains that teachers assess their students continuously, by intuition and observation in normal classroom conditions. These alternative assessment methods can become supportive of the teaching and learning process (Cameron, 2001) and do not only take linguistic factors into consideration, but also non-linguistic factors (Harris & McCann, 1994). Brown (1994) mentions "performance-based assessment" in which students are assessed during performance in various tasks, such as hands-on projects.

Everything that happens in a classroom is potential evidence of student learning. Data, whether linguistic or non-linguistic, can be collected using informal strategies which include photographs, videotapes, tape recordings, conferencing, portfolio assessment and observations. Each of these methods can be used simultaneously together with any other tool to collect further data on student learning.

On-going informal assessment methods, like the ones mentioned above, are considered to be of a formative nature (as opposed to summative) (Cameron, 2001). By monitoring and recording students' progress, individual learner's needs are identified and future learning targets can be established (Brewster et al., 2002). This means that assessment at this level should focus on the process rather than the product, following Smith's (1995, p. 4) statement that young learners 'have the privilege and right to be a product in process'. Assessment by observation clearly focuses on the students' progress.

Assessment by Observation

In informal assessment conditions children do not feel threatened as everyday classroom activities become assessment tasks (Cameron, 2001). It is important for children to be observed and assessed as they learn because very young learners demonstrate their understanding and learning by doing, showing and telling. Observation is a useful assessment tool because it does not disturb ordinary classroom activities. Therefore, students should not be aware that they are being assessed and possible feelings of anxiety or stress are reduced (Brown, 1994).

As it is easy to fall into the trap of relying solely on rough impressions, it is advisable

to establish clear criteria for the observation to become systematic. These observations provide important information to be used as feedback to modify or plan subsequent lessons, what Cameron (2001, p. 231) calls a 'continuous process of *observe-notice-adjust teaching*'.

A record-keeping tool may be a checklist of pre-defined clear assessment criteria that students are to achieve during a unit of work, a term or an academic year, in the form of target performance statements (Cameron, 2001). Although a yes/no or pass/fail system may be used, a more descriptive system may be useful in which students can be seen to improve along a continuum to different degrees by using band scales or by using a "Continuum Chart" which is completed over time to show each learner's progress (Brewster et al., 2002). This may be enriched with a recording notebook or teacher journal in which comments are written about each student.

Sample Assessment Tool: The "Continuum Chart"

An informal assessment tool (Appendix 1) has been designed for a class of 25, five year old learners, learning English as a foreign language in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. These kindergarten children have been learning English for two years, since the age of three, for about two hours and a half a week. At the age of five they extend their English lessons to eight hours a week.

This type of alternative assessment is based on observation of students in normal classroom activities as an ongoing process, or what Brown (1994) calls "performance-based" assessment. This particular format is what Brewster at al. (2002) describe as a "continuum chart" which is to be filled in over time. This tool was designed to fulfil the six core principles of assessment outlined earlier.

With this assessment tool the teacher will be looking for evidence of the learning of linguistic and non-linguistic aspects by systematically observing students engaging in normal classroom activities. It contains four sections which include linguistic skills: listening, speaking, vocabulary and literacy skills with two to six descriptors in each. Non-linguistic factors include attitude, cooperativeness and effort and contain two to three descriptors in each. Each descriptor has a three point scale ranging from a statement describing a student who has difficulties to a more successful student in the area. One copy of the assessment tool is to be used for each student covering the whole academic school year.

This is intended to be a visual tool for the teacher, where each section is separated into smaller sections and the boxes are to be filled in following a colour code. When a student moves up the continuum chart and shows evidence of success in an area, the appropriate box is coloured in using a different colour for each term (although any other time-scale could be used) to differentiate learning and to detect learner progress

and changes over the year. There is space at the bottom for further comments where the teacher writes any other observations of the child's learning and another for comments on targets for further learning to identify points on which to improve. These may be useful as comments to provide to parents and can be transformed into comments for writing report cards.

Conclusion

For assessment to be effective in very young learner classrooms it should support learning and contribute to the teaching and learning process (Cameron, 2001). Its major function is to compile clear information on student learning from everyday situations and inform teaching to improve future learning. It is important that teachers use assessment continuously and on an on-going basis and that the selected assessment tool clearly shows the progress of the learner over time as a tracking device. It is suggested that teachers find authentic ways of assessing their students and adapt a tool or design their own recording tool to suit their style.

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Appendix 1.

Sample assessment tool - Continuum Chart

School: _____   Teacher: _____

Name of Student: _____Age: _____

Term 1 Date: _____   Colour code: ☐

Term 2 Date: _____   Colour code: ☐

LINGUISTIC FACTORS

Listening:

Cannot understand simple instructions		Has some difficulty understanding simple instructions		Understands simple instructions	

Cannot understand simple oral/narrative texts		Understands simple oral/narrative texts		Understands a variety of oral/narrative texts	

Cannot understand classroom language		Needs help to understand classroom language		Understands classroom language unaided	

Cannot listen and point to pictures described by the teacher		Listens and points to pictures described by the teacher with some difficulty		Listens and points to pictures described by the teacher	

Cannot listen to a description and draw or colour a picture appropriately		Listens to a description and draws or colours a picture with some assistance		Listens to a description and draws or colours a picture independently	

Cannot listen and sequence pictures		Has difficulty listening and sequencing pictures		Listens and sequences pictures with ease	

Speaking:

Does not participate in oral activities and does not communicate using oral language		Participates in some oral activities and uses familiar language		Participates in most oral activities and tries to use new language as well as familiar language	

Does not sing songs, say rhymes or poems from memory		Sings songs, says rhymes or poems from memory with difficulty		Sings songs, says rhymes or poems from memory	

Impossible to understand due to pronunciation issues		Has some pronunciation difficulties		Pronounces intelligibly	

Cannot ask questions using pre-fabricated phrases		Is able to ask questions using pre-fabricated phrases when helped		Asks questions using pre-fabricated phrases with ease and unaided	

Cannot answer questions using set phrases		Is able to answer questions using set phrases when helped		Answers questions by using set phrases	

Vocabulary:

Does not recognize spoken vocabulary		Recognizes spoken vocabulary with aid		Recognizes spoken vocabulary with ease and without assistance	

Does not use vocabulary		Does not use vocabulary appropriately at all times		Uses vocabulary appropriately	

Cannot answer questions concerning quantity		Answers questions concerning quantity up to number 10		Answers questions concerning quantity up to number 25	

Does not yet recognize colours		Recognizes some colours		Recognizes most colours	

Cannot form the plural of nouns		Forms the plural of nouns inconsistently		Forms the plural of nouns adequately	

Literacy skills:

Cannot decode any high-frequency words		Has some difficulty decoding high-frequency words		Can decode some high-frequency words	

Cannot retell a picture story in his/her own words		Can retell a picture story in his/her own words with assistance / prompting		Can retell a picture story in his/her own words independently	

NON-LINGUISTIC FACTORS

Attitude:

Does not participate in any activity		Only participates in activities of his/her interest		Participates actively in all class activities	

Seems to be uninterested in class activities		Is interested in some class activities		Always appears to be interested in class activities	

Does not show interest in the language		Seems to be interested in the language when praised		Shows a good attitude towards the language	

Cooperativeness:

Does not co-operate with members of class		Is generally cooperative with other members of class		Is always co-operative with teacher/peers	

Is only able to work alone		Sometimes works well in pairs/groups		Is able to work in pairs/groups with ease	

Effort:

Still needs encouragement to put in effort		Displays a reasonable effort		Works to the best of his/her ability	

Still needs encouragement to produce tidy and finished pieces of work		Generally completes pieces of work with care		Produces high quality finished pieces of work	

OTHER COMMENTS / OBSERVATIONS

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_____

TARGETS FOR FURTHER LEARNING

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